

Statement of Senator George V. Voinovich
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
“Protecting Animal and Public Health:
Homeland Security and the Federal Veterinary Workforce”
February 26, 2009

Good afternoon. Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing to discuss the shortage of veterinarians in the federal workforce. Veterinarians play a critical role in ensuring our nation's food safety and security and in promoting public health. As the FDA seeks new authorities to regulate the nation's food supply in the wake of another deadly salmonella outbreak, today's hearing reminds us of the importance of having a workforce of sufficient size and capacity to perform the job we've asked them to do.

Approximately 2,600 men and women are matriculating from our nation's schools of veterinary medicine each year, yet demand for these professionals is increasing and a large number of retirements is expected. As a result, meeting current federal veterinarian hiring needs will become increasingly challenging.

Tomorrow marks one year since I asked OPM to identify professional fields that are at greatest risk over the coming years and its efforts to ensure the government is addressing this risk appropriately. In reviewing OPM's March 11 response, I was pleased to see that OPM correctly identified veterinarians as an occupation that will experience significant recruiting needs over the next several years.

However, I am concerned that it took almost one year from OPM's response identifying a critical need before the issuance of government-wide direct hire authority for veterinarians. I'm hopeful we can work more quickly to address critical workforce needs, particularly when they impact public health and safety.

OPM and agencies must continually look for innovative ways to strategically manage and align staff through recruitment, development and retention. Otherwise, we will be unable to compete for talent. This won't happen by osmosis. I believe GAO's recommendation for an ongoing, comprehensive assessment of the federal government's veterinarian workforce will bring necessary focus to this critical occupation. Such efforts should be coordinated with the Chief Human Capital Officers Council and incorporated into each agency's Strategic Human Capital Plan.

In addition to ensuring the federal government is equipped to recruit and retain a world-class veterinary workforce, we must also ensure our veterinary schools of medicine have the capacity to meet the projected 35 percent increase in the number of jobs for veterinarians.

Mr. Chairman, the GAO report you requested has brought needed attention to a human capital challenge facing both the public and private sector. Now, it is the responsibility of those appearing before the subcommittee today and for us in Congress to find a common-sense solution. As part of my efforts, I plan to introduce legislation to provide additional scholarships

to students in exchange for public service. The scholarships will be available at both the undergraduate and graduate level to fill critical occupations, including veterinarians.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for calling today's hearing. I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses.